



A) Amendments to the Claims:

Claims 1 - 12 (previously presented)

Claims 13 - 25 (canceled)

Claim 26 (new): A minimally invasive surgical implant system comprising:
a plate assembly having at least two spaced screw receiving elements slidable with respect to each other for adjustably changing the distance between elements; and
an insertion tool releaseably connected to said plate assembly for manipulating the plate assembly and operable for remotely adjusting the distance between said elements.

Claim 27 (new): The implant system of claim 26 wherein said plate assembly having proximal and distal ends and said insertion tool is releaseably connected to said proximal end of said plate assembly whereby said tool and plate assembly extend together end to end.

Claim 28 (new): The implant system of claim 27, said plate assembly including a lock assembly for selectively locking said at least two screw receiving elements to prevent further relative sliding therebetween.

Claim 29 (new): The implant system of claim 28, wherein said screw receiving elements are respectively proximally and distally positioned on said plate assembly and each element has a screw head socket bowl for receiving the head of a bone fixation screw with mating intimacy, and a passage in the bottom of each bowl for passage of the shank of a bone fixation screw.

Claim 30 (new): The implant system of claim 29, including an open ended guide wire capture slot in said distal end of said assembly which communicates with said distal bowl passage.

Claim 31 (new): The implant system of claim 27, wherein said distal end has a leading transverse edge which is tapered for permitting the implant to nestle next to a facet joint without impeding the joint's functional movement.

Claim 32 (new): The implant system of claim 29, said proximal screw receiving element slidable along an arm portion of said plate assembly, said lock assembly including a slot in said arm portion underlying said proximal bowl for receiving the shank of a fixation screw therethrough and therealong at desired positions, and said slot dimensioned for seating portions of the head of a bone fixation screw protruding from said proximal bowl passage.

Claim 33 (new): The implant system of claim 32, edges of said slot including an aligned series of adjacent screw head seat depressions for selectively seating portions of the head of a bone fixation screw.

Claim 34 (new): A method of stabilizing spaced vertebra bodies in the human spine with minimally invasive surgery, comprising the steps of:

providing an elongate implant plate assembly having proximal and distal ends with first and second screw receiving socket elements configured for respective attachment to first and second spaced vertebra with the aid of bone fixation screws, said elements slidably received with respect to each other for adjustably changing the distance between said screw receiving socket elements, and having a lock assembly for selectively locking said first and second screw receiving socket elements from further relative sliding, said second socket element positioned adjacent the proximal end of said plate assembly;

additionally providing an elongate insertion tool which is releaseably securable to the proximal end of said plate assembly whereby said tool and elongate plate assembly extend together end to end in their direction of elongation when secured together, and configured for manipulating said plate assembly and for remotely manipulating said socket elements for adjusting the distance therebetween;

securing said insertion tool to the proximal end of said plate assembly for manipulation thereof;

making an incision adjacent said second vertebra for inserting said implant plate assembly;

inserting said plate assembly into said incision, distal end first, and positioning said second screw receiving socket over said second vertebra by manipulation with said insertion tool;

extending said distal end relative to said proximal end and thereby positioning

said first screw receiving socket over said first vertebra by remote manipulation with said insertion tool;

securing said distal and proximal ends respectively to said first and second vertebra with bone fixation screws received in said first and second screw receiving sockets;

adjusting the distance between said first and second socket elements to a desired degree by remote manipulation of said socket elements with said insertion tool for thereby adjusting the distance between the two secured vertebra;

locking said socket elements from further relative motion with said lock assembly; and

detaching said insertion tool from said implant plate assembly.

Claim 35 (new): The method of claim 34, including the step of guiding the manipulations of said implant plate assembly relative to said vertebra by using fluoroscopy.

Claim 36 (new): The method of claim 35, including the steps of pre-penetrating said first and second vertebra for thereby providing guide channels for said screws, positioning guide wires in said guide channels prior to the steps of securing, and securing by using self tapping cannulated pedicle screws received over and guided by said wires, and removing said guide wires after the step of securing.

Claim 37 (new): The method of claim 36, wherein the step of positioning said distal end includes providing an open ended guide slot in the leading edge of said distal end which provides access to a distal screw securement passage in said first screw receiving socket element, and guiding the extension and positioning of said distal end by capturing said distal guide wire in said slot while extending said distal end until said distal passage of said first socket element is centered over said distal guide wire.

Claim 38 (new): The method of claim 34, wherein the step of locking said socket elements together is accomplished by fully securing said proximal second screw.